

Sermon: Good Friday 2020

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I have two little girls; many of you have met them: four-year-old Anna and almost-two-year-old Miriam. They are lovely, intense little girls with strong feelings and correspondingly strong outbursts and meltdowns. I delight in them, but they challenge me, they challenge me greatly.

I have had to learn a great deal about navigating the strong feelings of these strong little girls. One thing that I have learned is that when children have a meltdown or an outburst, our job as the adult, in that moment, is *not* to fix their problem or to explain their feelings to them--even though this is my impulse. (Even worse is my impulse to explain to them why they caused the problem in the first place or why their feelings are wrong or unreasonable.)

Instead, what I have learned to do is just to hold them. To let them pour out their feelings. All of their feelings, whatever they may be. To let them pour their feelings into me--because their feelings are so much larger than they could ever hold. It is my job as an adult to show them that I can hold their feelings for them when they can't hold them themselves.

A social-worker friend of mine once told me that when a child is overwhelmed by their emotions, their rational brain turns off and is not able to fully come back online until 26 minutes *after* the emotional meltdown is over. This, by the way, is true for adults, as well as for children.

The time of emotional over load (of sorrow, frustration, anger, pain, fear, and hurt) is not a time for explanations or meaning-making; it's a time for holding close.

If you're like me, your heart has broken open so many times this Holy Week. So many times.

Let me tell you about just one such moment this week; and it's hardly the only one:

I stumbled across a Washington Post article the other day about the impact of the coronavirus in hard-hit Guayaquil, Ecuador. The city of 3 million has numerous impoverished residents, living in close quarters. Its healthcare system is most incapable of serving the dire need brought on by the current pandemic, and there is no one to ask for help, because we are all in dire need. Instead, many of its residents are dying at home, and it has become impossible to find funeral homes or cemetery sites to hold those people who have died. So in this situation of great need, bodies are just being left

outside because their loved ones have nothing else that they can do. The article contains video and photos of bodies and coffins left outside or strapped to cars as their loved ones struggle to know how to respond to their tragedy.

At least Jesus' friends and family had a place to lay his body, but these bodies in Guayaquil? There is no place.

We all know, far too well, that this tragic pandemic is playing out similarly all over the world, close by and far off, and we can't truly know, but we can certainly imagine, that this suffering is intensified in situations and places of great need.

But this is one of the places that I know, Guayaquil, in one of the places that I love, Ecuador--a country that I lived in for two years, and the suffering of a people that I love. And my heart breaks open again.

How do we read and hear and live stories like this, over and over, during a pandemic? How can we possibly do this during Holy Week? On Good Friday? How do we confront the most solemn day of the Christian year during this most terrible time.

What can we do when our suffering coincides in this way with Jesus' suffering?

Christians have exerted much theological and spiritual energy trying to make meaning of the cross. Much ink has been spilled making sense of his death: Does God require this sort of suffering? Why? Who's being paid off with this sacrifice? Is it God, the devil? Is Good Friday good? What good is there to speak of here?

I took a whole graduate course trying to tackle this question. And, in spite of all of that, I sometimes wonder if the cross has any meaning at all, or whether its only meaning is tied to its meaninglessness.

But today, Good Friday, in this time, the time of pandemic, is not the time to make meaning of the cross. Much like the disciples, we are still in a time of fear and grief.

Instead, it is a time to hold tightly, like children, to Jesus' nearness to suffering. To be held close by God, who is to us a parent, a parent who can hold for us, all of our feelings--our suffering, our frustration, our anger, our grief, our hopelessness.

Let us, then, be held by the God who holds all things. And by God's son who has suffered all things with us.

Listen to today's reading from Isaiah. In it we learn that God's servant:

- Was a “man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity” (v.3).
- He is one who has “borne our infirmities and carried our diseases” (v.4).
- The servant has “poured out himself to death” (v.12).

What might it mean for us to let ourselves understand that God’s servant has carried our diseases, even the disease of COVID-19? That he has borne it with us? That those that suffer from it never suffer alone, but suffer with God’s servant?

When we turn to the Psalm, we hear the author of the Psalm describe in anguished terms:

- His own groans and tears (vs. 1-2).
- He describes himself, so, “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.” (vs. 14-15).
- And in the midst of his tremendous suffering, the Psalmist calls to mind that God “[does] not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted.” He says, “[God does] not hide his face from me, but [God] heard when I cried to him” (vs. 24). God is present to his suffering; God hears him and is with him.

This description from Psalm 22 of great suffering and of God’s presence with the one who suffers is evoked by Jesus at the time of his own death on the cross when he quotes the heart-wrenching first line of this Psalm: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Here, Jesus cries out, naming his own experience of god-forsakenness. And for Christians like us who also suffer, we experience the quietly-dawning realization that God has never been closer to us than in this moment of Jesus’ suffering. That in the suffering and dying Jesus, we see God crucified with us and for us. Never closer than in this moment.

Jesus chooses to walk this path towards suffering and death, a path that all of us as creatures will walk, and which so many are walking this very day. To suffer in his body and to die a creaturely death. To say, “It is finished.” And to die.

He does this to be near to creatures like us, most especially in our time of suffering and death. To draw us near. And like us to die.

This is what makes Good Friday good: God's intimacy with creation's suffering, and Jesus' deep knowing of our creaturely existence.

As we remember Jesus' death on this Good Friday, while we sit today with our suffering, facing this illness besetting our whole beautiful, broken world, may God's love hold us close, encircling us like the love of a mother gathering her hurt children to her.

May Jesus walk with us, carrying our sufferings like he carried the cross.

And may we know that we are never, ever, alone. Our sorrows are gathered up into the arms of God through the suffering of his Son.

Amen.